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ABSTRACT

To determine the characteristics of, problems with, and teachers' attitudes toward the elementary language arts curriculum, a survey was distributed to 160 elementary teachers (101 teachers responded; 86 females and 15 males--a 63% rate of return). Results showed that teachers perceived no difficulties communicating either with other teachers within the school or with parents. They saw classroom management and discipline as the source of major problems. Over 90% of the teachers supported recreational reading in the classroom and 80% favored using a wide variety of writing experiences in the program. Listing the components of a language arts curriculum in order of importance, the teachers placed vocabulary deveopment first, followed by reading, listening, speaking, usage, language development, literature, written composition, grammar, mechanics, creative writing, and dramatics. Among the results were indications that teachers downplayed the importance of language development; valued literature, and exposed students to varied forms, but did not view it as an important part of the curriculum; and supported a variety of writing assignments but provided little opportunity for regular writing practice in their language arts program. (The survey instrument is appended.) (MM)

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ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS TAKE AN INTROSPECTIVE LOOK: IMPLICATIONS OF A SURVEY OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

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Language is the major means by which ideas are shared, so the language arts are often viewed as the foundation of the elementary school curriculum. The teaching of the four aspects of language communication- listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is in many ways the teacher's most important task.

For many years, however, attention has been focused on the teaching of reading. The teaching of students to become effective listeners, coherent speakers, and concise writers has often been neglected in favor of spending more time developing skill in reading. It is apparent that the sequence of the development of language skills and the interrelationship and interdependence of all areas of the language arts has not been understood by many teachers. Perhaps now the time has come to re-examine the ways in which language arts is taught since the findings of the NAEP have suggested an inability of students to communicate clearly in written form and research in the teaching of reading is focusing on the importance of the total language development of the child.

The purpose of this study was to survey elementary teachers to determine their attitudes, opinions, and practices about the teaching of the language arts in the elementary school. It was hoped that the results of the survey would answer the following questions:

1. What problems exist in the areas of management, student interest, parent support, and communication with fellow teachers and university professors?

2. What attitudes exist toward the teaching of reading?

3. How do teachers feel about the teaching of writing?

4. How often do students write compositions and engage in a variety of creative writing assignments?

5. What factors keep bright, talented students from choosing to become elementary school teachers? and,

6. What are the important components of the language arts curriculum.

Procedures

One hundred sixty surveys were distributed to elementary school teachers enrolled in graduate reading and language arts courses at Saginaw Valley State College in Saginaw Michigan. Those students were asked to distribute the survey to fellow teachers in the Bay City, Saginaw, Midland school districts of mid-Michigan as well as in the eastern surburban districts of the Detroit metropolitan area.

One hundred one surveys were returned for a 63% rate of return. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyze the data.

Findings

Of the 101 elementary teachers who completed the survey (Appendix A), 86 were female and 15 male. There were 58 primary (K-3) teachers, 35 intermediate (4-6) grade teachers, three seventh and eighth grade teachers and five who serviced the entire school.

Sixty percent list the Bachelor's degree as the highest degree they have attained.

Using the following age groupings, the age distribution for the teachers was as follows:

22-25= 4	26-30= 13	31-35= 24
36-40= 27	41-50= 20	51-60= 7
61-65= 1		

Allowing for the four teachers who chose not to answer this question, the mean age of the respondents was 37.5.

The number of students taught per day ranged from 10 to 360. The number of minutes allotted per week of released time for preparation ranged from 0-550 minutes (approximately 9 hours). Two-thirds of the teachers were not involved in any extra-curricular activities nor had they taken any graduate language arts courses within the last five years.

Major problems appeared in the area of classroom management and discipline. Elementary teachers also saw the financial support for schools as a limiting factor in what could be offered students.

There appeared to be no problem communicating with peers at each grade level and within the school but it became a problem communicating with elementary teachers district-wide and with university professors.

Since 98% of the respondents hold parent conferences, communication with parents was not a problem. Parents were viewed as being interested in school and supportive of what children read in school.

Teachers were split on the lack of student interest. Physical conditions of the classroom were seen as adequate but teachers acknowledged the fact that student retention often also meant repeating the same activities.

The results of the reading section of the survey revealed:

1. 79% of the teachers provided their students with a variety of different kinds of literature but only 62% required material to be memorized while 66% believed literature should be used to teach values.

2. over 90% of the teachers agreed that students should have time to read for pleasure in the classroom and that a wide range of reading materials should be available to encourage that activity.

3. only 59% of the teachers used newspapers and magazines for reading assignments but that students were taught to read effectively in the content areas.

Attitudes about composition revealed:

1. overwhelming support (80%) was shown to provide and encourage a variety of writing experiences.

2. a belief that students should have opportunities to select their theme topics, share their compositions with peers for critiquing, and use their writing as the best way to learn rules of usage and mechanics.

3. only 62 to 67% pf the teachers, however, saw the need for students to keep a writing journal and engage in pre-writing and revising activities as a way to complement themes.

Fewer than half of the respondents shared data concerning the number of times their students write compositions and write creatively each week, each semester, each grading period, and each year. The means for each category revealed:

1. students write less than two compositions and creative assignments a week.

2. students write an average of seven compositions and assignments each grading period.

3. students have approximately twenty writing experiences of both types each semester. and,

4. over the course of a year, students are exposed to both types of writing exercises thirty-two times.

Low salary was stated to be the major reason "good" elementary teachers were not attracted to the profession. Work load was cited as the second problem followed by poor preparation, community problems, and low social status in descending order of importance. Many respondents were compelled to add additional factors such as teacher lay-offs and lack of recognition for a job well-done. Over half of the respondents, however, would advise their son or daughter to become elementary teachers if an interest was shown.

Important components of the language arts curriculum in descending order were as follows:

1. vocabulary development
2. reading
3. listening
4. speaking
5. usage
6. language development
7. literature
8. written composition
9. grammar (tied) mechanics (tied) creative writing
10. drama (acting)

Conclusions/Implications

Several conclusions and implications can be drawn from the results of this study:

1. There appeared to be a lack of understanding of language development given its low ranking of importance in the curriculum, relative to the high importance given vocabulary development.

2. While there was strong support for a variety of writing assignments, there appeared to be minimal opportunities for students to write on a regular basis and only lip-service given to its relative importance in the language arts curriculum.

3. Teachers appeared to value literature and expose students to varied forms yet they did not view it as being an important part of the curriculum.

4. Inservice programs appeared to be the most viable way to update competencies and also allow dialogue and interaction with university professors.

5. The only consistency of attitudes found in this study was reflected in the strong support for reading and its high importance shown in the language arts curriculum.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY OF PRACTICES IN ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

N= 101

Degrees obtained:

Bachelors' 60 Year ___ Major _____ Minor _____

Masters' 39 Year ___ Major _____ Minor _____

Specialist 2 Year ___ Major _____ Minor _____

PhD or EdD ___ Year ___ Major _____ Minor _____

Circle number: (for sex and race)

Sex: 1. Female - 86 2. Male - 15

Race: 1. American Indian/Alaskan Native 1
2. Asian/Pacific Islander
3. Black not Hispanic 2
4. Hispanic 1
5. White not Hispanic 94
6. Prefer not to answer 3

Age: N= 97 37.5 - mean

Grade level Currently Teaching _____
Years Teaching at this Level _____

Circle the number:

Are you a member of: 1. MCTE - 2 3. NCTE 1
2. MEA 4. NEA

Number of students taught per day range = 10 - 360

Amount of released time for preparation per week range = 0 - 550

Please list extracurricular activities in which you are involved with students:

None - 67

List graduate language arts courses taken within the last five years:

Yes - 36

NO - 65

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
				1.	Which of the following do you see as major problems
20	39	33	7		a. Classroom management and discipline - 99
1	21	59	15		b. Emphasis on extra-curricular activities - 96
15	31	45	6		c. Lack of uniform curriculum development in language arts - 97
4	19	50	23		d. Lack of communication among faculty at your grade level - 96
7	34	48	10		e. Lack of communication among total faculty - 99
9	43	44	4		f. Lack of student interest - 100
18	26	47	8		g. Too many non-teaching duties (bus duty, ticket selling clerical and administrative duties, etc.) - 99
1	31	64	4		h. Lack of communication with parents - 100
5	58	31	4	2.	A unit on career education should be taught as part of the language arts curriculum. - 98
6	33	60	2	3.	Too many non-fundamental components have been added to the curriculum. - 101
27	48	23	3	4.	Financial support for the schools limits what you are able to offer students - 101
9	66	21	1	5.	Our current curriculum is adequate to prepare students - 97
20	41	37	3	6.	Lack of interest in schools on the part of parents is a real problem - 101
4	29	45	13	7.	Provisions are made to see that students who repeat a grade are not given exactly the same activities again. - 91
3	34	54	8	8.	Effective communication among all the elementary teachers is characteristic of the school system. - 99
1	13	48	21	9.	Adequate communication exists with those who teach language arts at the college and university levels. - 83
2	43	37	16	10.	Procedures such as television instruction, team teaching, and teaching machines are used. - 98
10	62	20	7	11.	Academic freedom is practiced in choosing materials and methods you use in the classroom - 99

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
7	62	26	5	12.	Inservice programs are offered on a regular basis in your district - 100
14	50	31	6	13.	The physical conditions of the classroom are adequate (storage, lighting. ventilation, etc.) - 101
30	68	2	1	14.	Conferences are held with parents during the year - 101
14	72	13	1	15.	Parents seldom object to the type of books the students read - 100
4	33	47	14	16.	Students are required to memorize certain pieces of literature - 98
6	59	29	4	17.	Literature is used to teach values - 98
18	59	18	1	18.	Your students are exposed to a variety of different kinds of literature (novels, short stories, non-fiction, drama) - 96
7	52	37	4	19.	Periodicals (newspapers, magazines) are used for reading assignments. - 100
11	57	31	1	20.	Students are taught how to read effectively in social studies, science and math - 100
56	42	3	___	21.	Students should have time to read for pleasure in the classroom. - 101

READING

31	58	10	1	1.	Pre-reading activities are provided to help students increase their vocabulary. - 100
9	39	44	4	2.	Our curriculum includes required outside reading for students. - 96
25	59	13	1	3.	Alternatives to traditional oral and written book reports are necessary for students - 98
39	54	8	___	4.	It is important to determine the level of readability for materials used in my classes. - 101
36	58	6	___	5.	A wide range of reading materials are available to encourage pleasure reading by students. - 100

COMPOSITION

38	51	11	___	6.	It is important to provide a variety of writing (narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative) experiences for all your students. - 100

Stongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
18	42	36	___	7.	Each student should keep a writing journal. -96
12	59	20	1	8.	Pre-writing and revising activities are designed to complement written themes - 92
13	75	6	___	9.	Students are provided with opportunities to select their own theme topics on some occasions. - 94
33	64	2	1	10.	Creative or imaginative writing assignments are encouraged on some occasions. - 100
21	56	19	1	11.	The best way to teach correct usage and mechanics is through student writing - 97
22	64	13	1	12.	Students should be provided with opportunities to share their compositions with peers for critiquing. - 100
13	58	16	3	13.	Teachers from other disciplines work on the writing skills appropriate to their subjects. -90
24	52	20	___	14.	Do you think scholastic standards should be more stringent? - 96
6	16	50	20	15.	Non-standard English speaking students should be taught to write standard English before being allowed to write creatively. - 92
9	49	21	17	16.	You would advise your daughter to become an elementary teacher if she showed an interest. -96
9	45	21	21	17.	You would advise your son to become an elementary teacher if he showed an interest. -96

18. How often do you have students write a composition?

Number each week 0-5 (40) number each semester 1-90 (33)
Number each grading period 1-25 (38) number each year 2-99 (37)

19. How often do you have students write creatively? (original drama, stories, poems, etc.)

Number each week 0-5 (48) number each semester 1-90 (37)
number each grading period 0-20 (37) number each year 2-99 (44)

20. What do you think contributes most to the difficulty of getting "good" elementary teachers?

Rank these from 1 for contributing most to 5 for contributing least

5 low social status
1 low salary
3 poor prepartion
4 community problems
2 work load

21. Which of the following do you see as important components of the Language Arts curriculum?

	very important	important	not very important
a. Literature	63	37	1
b. Vocabulary development	93	27	1
c. Drama (acting) (100)	15	68	27
d. Written composition	62	39	
e. Usage	68	33	
f. Language development (99)	67	30	2
g. Mechanics (98)	49	48	1
h. Reading (100)	89	11	
i. Speaking	69	32	
j. Listening	84	17	
k. Creative writing	49	49	3
l. Grammar	62	34	5